

Stark voters to decide if ATVs can continue using town roads as part of trail system

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STARK — Town Meeting voters in this small community will have what could be a big say in the operation of Ride The Wilds, billed as the largest interconnected ATV trail system in the Northeast.

Dedicated in 2013, the more than 1,000 miles of trails have been hailed as an economic tonic for upper Coos County. According to the New Hampshire Bureau of Trails, some 70 percent of Ride the Wilds (RTW) trails are on private property, with the balance split between municipal and state land.

Some 17 North Country towns, as well as the city of Berlin, allow all-terrain vehicles and off-highway recreational vehicles to be operated on municipal roads. In Stark, vehicles have been on town roads since 2015.

Stark Town Constable William Joyce said he has observed “a significant increase in the number of complaints from residents with homes along the trails’ roads,” including late-night riding, noise, speed, dust and riding in unpermitted areas.

Writing in the 2017 Stark Town Report, Joyce said one person reported that he had been “run off the road by an ATV due to speed and auxiliary high-intensity lights.” If approved, a petitioned warrant article would “close all Stark roads to ATV and OHRV vehicle travel beginning April 15, 2018.”

The closing would have a direct impact on the southern-most, east-west corridor in the RTW system that now links the Androscoggin and Connecticut river valleys.

Chris Gamache, head of the NH Bureau of Trails, said “Corridor D” was always meant to be temporary. The plan had been for the RTW trail in Stark to go through the south end of the Nash Stream State Forest, but when the forest plan was adopted in 2017, it did not include that provision.

The forest plan won’t be up for review for another decade, said Gamache. He is hopeful that “we can find a resolution” of the Corridor D problem, “but it’s not a fast process.”

Ride The Wilds grew “very quickly,” he said, and residents of communities where it is located need to recognize that “future economic growth is going to come with some growing pains.”

Stephen Clorite is vice president of the North Country OHRV Coalition, which oversees RTW, as well as vice president of the NH Off-Highway Vehicle Association and president of the Androscoggin Valley ATV Club.

On Sunday he said he shared Gamache's optimism that a resolution to Corridor D will be found. Clorite expects that Stark voters will defeat Article 16 at Town Meeting on March 13 because he believes that most are supportive of ATVs.

If the measure is adopted, he said it would mean some scrambling for the state and his organizations, because "as it sits right now, Corridor D is the only viable option unless we get permission to go through some conservation property."

He acknowledged that Ride The Wilds has experienced "growing pains" and that the trail network's economic benefit needs to be spread out more evenly.

Clorite said he and the OHRV community support Fish and Game giving grants to cover the cost of towns policing the trails as well as the department's plan to hire two officers whose exclusive responsibility would be to patrol Ride The Wilds.

Without Corridor D, said Clorite, "what you're going to end up with is more localized riding and less riding through the entire system and you'll get more localized economic impact." The riders, however, will still come.

"Riders will ride," said Clorite, "because they know what we have to offer," and the challenge is to "get them to spend their money across the board rather than in one area or another."

Even though Stark is largely residential, he said "there are some cottage industries there that are looking to capitalize" on having Ride The Wilds come through the town.